

4. SERVANT LEADERSHIP

Introduction? When it comes to a body of believers, inquiring minds want to know, “Who’s in charge here?” The spiritual answer is that Jesus, of course, is ultimately in charge. But, what about humanly speaking, here on earth?

G.W. Kirby (London Bible College): “The NT does not lay down precise rules ... as to the ... government of the Church. Over the centuries several different theories of church government have emerged, each of which claims some scriptural basis.”¹

Three types of church government have emerged: episcopal, presbyterian, and congregational. Episcopal government is like a pyramid, with one man at the top (be he pope or arch-bishop). Presbyterian government is rule by a group of men (a presbytery or session). In neither episcopal nor presbyterian polity is the local congregation autonomous. In congregational polity the local church is autonomous. Within congregationalism are two types of government: elder rule and congregational rule.

Premise: To lead like Jesus, church leaders need to adopt both Jesus’ management style and the most biblical form of government (Jesus even promised a blessing for those who do, **John 13:17**). Jesus’ teachings on leadership are counter intuitive; it is opposite of the world’s ways. It is not appropriate for government or business.

I. Church Leaders’ “Authority”

****1. The setting of Luke 22 is the last supper. **What are great church leaders called to do (Luke 22:24-27)?** The greatest in church leadership are called to become as the youngest, and as one who serves (**22:26**).

ESV Mark 9:35b If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all.

What dispute prompted Jesus to talk about leadership (Luke 22:24)? The disciples were arguing about which one of them was the greatest. They appeared to be very worldly in their thinking, full of ambition, ego, and pride.

2. In what sense did ancient kings “exercise lordship” and “authority” (Luke 22:25) over their subjects?

- **“exercise lordship” (22:25):** From *kurieuo* (#2961), “to be master, rule, control.”² It is the verb form of the noun “lord.” Thayer wrote that it means “to have dominion over.”³ It is to be able to “boss around.”

¹ G.W. Kirby, *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 854.

² Bauer, *Lexicon*, 458.

³ Thayer, *Lexicon*, 365.

- **“in authority over” (22:25):** From *exousiazo*, “the right or power to do with something or someone as one sees fit.”⁴ It is to have someone under your control.

What is a “benefactor” (22:25)? In English, a benefactor is a person who gives money or other help to a person or cause. The Greek is *euergetes*; *eu* means good, and an *erg* in science is a unity of energy; in Greek it refers to work. Thus, a benefactor is someone who is working good for another.

3. Why did Jesus mention that these kings were called “benefactors” (22:25)?

Perhaps it was because it wasn’t true; it was false advertising, a publicity stunt. On the other hand, all government is established by God (**Ro 13**), and is necessary in human society to punish evil doers. Government ultimately is for our good.

4. Jesus said, “But not so with you” (22:26a); what did ancient kings do that church leaders should not? The disciples were to be benefactors, but not like the rulers of the Gentiles who 1) lorded it over people (22:25), 2) exercised authority.

What is a synonym for “rather” in 22:26? “Rather” is an adverb used as a substitute or equivalent, as an alternative for something else. The actual Greek is *de*, an adversative particle. A good synonym would be “instead.”

5. How much authority does the youngest person in a social group typically have (22:26)? Children typically have the least authority in any social group, given rise to the old saying that children are to be seen, but not heard.

In Roman society, to what type of person does “the one who serves” refer (Luke 22:26)? The Greek here is *diakonos* (basis for “deacon”), a “waiter.” The idea is that of household servant who is a waiter or a maid.

6. How much authority do servants typically have over those who hire them? They have no authority over those who own the household.

Summary: Jesus gave examples of those in Roman society who had the least authority—children and slaves. Although Jesus was a master of overstatement, there is an underlying truth that must not be glossed over: Church leaders are to be true servant leaders. Their attitude should be one of humility in leadership, not kingly authority that lords over people.

The Point: Leaders exist for the sake of the church, and are to be great in service:

7. What was Jesus’ purpose in saying the words of Luke 22:27? It functions as both as an example and an incentive to true servanthood. Jesus has authority over the church and all creation. Yet He came to earth not as a king, but as a servant (Phlp 2:5-8).

⁴ Bauer, *Lexicon*, 279.

ESV **Matthew 20:28** ... the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.

Application: The church leader's authority is that of a child and a waiter—those who have the least authority in the normal sense of the word. Certainly, a church leader does not have the same wisdom and understanding as a child. Indeed, he should be among the wisest in the church. Doubtless there is some degree of hyperbole here, yet the application to be gleaned from Jesus' words is that rather than lording over the congregation, church leaders are to lead by example. This type of "authority" will not work in secular governments nor business, but only in a redeemed community.

ESV **Matthew 20:26-28** ... whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave ...

Peter was present when Jesus said this, and reflected it in his epistle decades later:

ESV **1 Peter 5:1-3** I exhort the elders among you ... shepherd the flock of God, exercising oversight ... not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock.

****8. John 13 is also about the last supper. John recorded that Jesus washed their feet. **According to John 13:12-17, why did Jesus wash their feet?**

ESV **John 13:12-17** When he had washed their feet and put on his outer garments and resumed his place, he said to them, "Do you understand what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you. Truly, truly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them.

Jesus washed their feet as an example to make the point that anyone who wants to be a church leader must be the servant of all.

9. According to John 13:17, how can church leaders receive a blessing? Those who practice what Jesus taught and modeled about servant leadership are blessed, **13:17.**

ESV **John 13:17** If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them.

Premise: The teachings of Jesus on leadership must be the primary frame of reference for all else that the New Testament says about church leaders.

II. The Church as Congress

10. To what did the Greek word *ekklésia* (“church”) refer outside the Scriptures?

Outside the Bible, *ekklésia* was used almost without exception to refer to a political assembly that was regularly convened for the purpose of making decisions:

- “an assembly of the people convened at the public place of council for the purpose of deliberating” (Thayer).⁵
- “an assembly of a regularly summoned political body” (Bauer).⁶
- “clearly characterized as a political phenomenon, repeated according to certain rules and within a certain framework. It was the assembly of full citizens, functionally rooted in the constitution of the democracy ... in which fundamental political and judicial decisions were taken ...” In the *ekklesia*, “every citizen has the right to speak and to propose matters for discussion ...” (Lothan Coenen).^{7 8}

Summary: When you think of *ekklésia* (“church”), you should think of a political body such as a parliament, senate, or congress.

Why do you suppose Jesus chose a word with political connotations (*ekklésia*) to describe church meetings (Matthew 18:15-20)?⁹ Jesus intended His followers to function together with a purpose parallel to that of the political government. Believers have the responsibility to decide things together through the consensus process. God’s people have a decision-making mandate. A church is a body of Kingdom citizens authorized to weigh major issues, make decisions, and pass judgments on various issues. Had He merely wanted to describe a gathering with no political connotations, Jesus could have used *sunagogé*, *thiasos* (troupe) or *eranos* (banquet).

Donald Guthrie: “When decisions were made, they were made by the whole company of believers, not simply by the officials...”¹⁰

Baptist Faith and Message of 2000: “Each congregation operates under the Lordship of Christ through democratic processes.”¹¹

11. The first occurrence of the word “church” (*ekklésia*) is found in Matthew 16:18-19. What did Jesus say there that indicates it is a decision-making body?

⁵ Thayer, *Lexicon*, 196.

⁶ Bauer, *Lexicon*, 240.

⁷ Lothan Coenen, “Church,” *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, Vol. 1, Colin Brown, General Editor (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1971), 291.

⁸ Women were not allowed to speak in the secular *ekklésia* (Piper & Grudem, *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, p. 150). *Encyclopedia Britannica Micropaedia*, Volume 3, states: “the ecclesia became coterminous with the body of male citizens 18 years of age or over ...” (p. 771).

⁹ In the LXX, wilderness gatherings of the Israelites were also called an *ekklésia*.

¹⁰ Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Theology* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1981), 741.

¹¹ Article VI, “The Church.”

ESV **Matthew 16:18-19** ... on this rock I will build my church (*ekklésia*) ... I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.”

Keys/Kingdom: Immediately after referring to the *ekklésia*, Jesus spoke about keys to the kingdom. Keys represent the ability to you to lock or to unlock. “Kingdom” is a political term. The idea of binding and loosing are rabbinical terms that involve the authority to make decisions (to permit or to deny).

Insight: Each church has a **decision-making mandate**. It is an assembly of Kingdom citizens who are authorized (and expected) to make decisions. The church is to function as a citizen-judiciary (or city council). A church that never grapples corporately with major problems or resolves important issues is failing to fulfill its full purpose as an *ekklésia*.

A look at **church history** also serves to confirm this political idea behind *ekklésia*. For centuries, the church actually controlled the state government (i.e., the Holy Roman Empire or Calvin’s Geneva). Though the wrong application of *ekklésia*, it suggests that people throughout the years have understood the political nature of this word.

Examples of Congregational Involvement

12. How could the following texts be used to argue that the responsibility for decision making rests with the congregation? Matthew 18:17-18, 1 Corinthians 5:4-5, 12, 6:1-4. In **Matthew 18**, binding and loosing authority is conferred upon the *ekklésia*. Notice that no mention is made of any church leader here. Church discipline involves the whole church, not its leaders in isolation. Notice, however, that no decision was made by the church; there was no question of the man’s sinfulness. It was merely a matter of the whole church bringing pressure to bear on the sinful man in an effort to get him to repent. In **1 Corinthians 5**, Paul called upon the assembled church to could put a sinning brother out of fellowship.

Why didn’t Paul unilaterally put the sinful man out (1Co 5:4-5)? **1)** Paul was not present. **2)** Only the church as a whole could effectively do it (Paul did not direct the local elders to do it, nor were the elders even mentioned).

Note: As with Matthew 18, no decision had to be made about the sinfulness of the situation, the only decision was to obey Jesus’ teachings from Matthew 18, and thus withdraw fellowship from the man.

The Importance of Consensus

What does the word “consensus” mean? It means general agreement or accord. It is an opinion or position reached by a group as a whole. It is related to the word “consent” or “consensual.” Consensus is associated with unity, oneness, harmony, or mutual agreement.

13. What do 1 Corinthians 1:10, 2 Corinthians 13:11 and Philippians 2:2 imply about the importance of consensus? See also Psalm 133:1.

ESV **Psalm 133:1** Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity!

ESV **1 Corinthians 1:10** I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment.

ESV **2 Corinthians 13:11** ... agree with one another, live in peace ...

ESV **Philippians 2:2** ... complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.

What is the difference between majority rule, consensus, and unanimity?

14. How is consensus different from majority rule? Majority rule can be a 51% dictatorship, and tends to work against unity. Consensus is over-whelming agreement. Consensus works toward unity. Individual church members must be in fellowship with the Lord, put the interests of others ahead of themselves, and be willing to love each other despite any differences and until those differences are resolved. Church leaders must *build* consensus.

What is the difference between consensus and unanimity? Consensus is general agreement. Unanimity is 100% agreement. The goal is consensus, not unanimity.

Practical Concern: Some feel government by elder-led consensus is too utopian, that it would never work. It is important to remember that the process a church goes through in achieving consensus is often just as important as the consensus that is finally achieved. It takes time, commitment, mutual-edification, and a lot of brotherly love. It truly can work in a smaller church. We must love each other enough to put up with each other! **Do we really trust in the Holy Spirit to work in our lives and churches?**

Divine Provision

15. What provision has God made to help churches achieve consensus? See John 17:11, 20, 22-23, 1 Corinthians 10:17, Ephesians 4:11-13.

a). The Prayer of Jesus

ESV **John 17:11b** Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be one, even as we are one ...

ESV **John 17:20** I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one...

ESV **John 17:22-23** The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one ...

b). Lord's Supper

NIV **1 Corinthians 10:17** Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf.

c). Church Leaders

ESV **Ephesians 4:11-13** ... he gave ... pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith ...

III. Understanding Elder Rule

1 Timothy 5:17 refers to “elders who rule well.” Ruling is one way church leaders serve the church. However, “rule” needs to be carefully exegeted. “Rule” is from *proistēmi*; *pro* = before; *istēmi* = to stand. Thus, to stand in front of (like an orchestra director).¹² It is the idea of leadership. It certainly can mean to “rule,” but it can also mean to care for (like an attending physician). Considering what Jesus said about a church leader’s authority, it is probably better to understand *proistēmi* in the sense of caring for.

*****According to Hebrews 13:17, how should a congregation relate to its leaders?**¹³
The text states that the congregation is to obey and submit to the elders.

Rhetorical: **How do we reconcile this with what Jesus said about children and slaves?**

16. How are the Greek words “obey” and “submit” in Hebrews 13:17 different from the Greek word for “obey” in Ephesians 6:1, and “submit” in Colossians 3:18?

Obey

The common Greek word for “obey” is *hupakouo*:

ESV **Ephesians 6:1** Children, obey (*hupakouo*) your parents ...

ESV **Ephesians 6:5** Slaves, obey (*hupakouo*) your earthly masters ...

However, the Greek behind “obey” in **Hebrews 13:17** is *peitho*, “to persuade, to convince.”¹⁴ “Peitho” was the name of the goddess of persuasion, seduction and charming speech—a close companion of Aphrodite.¹⁵

¹² Bauer, *Lexicon*, 707.

¹³ The NIV has the word “authority” in Hebrews 13:17; it is not in the Greek. The word “leaders” is from the *hegeomai*. Although sometimes used of governmental rulers, it fundamentally simply meant “leader” or “guide.”

¹⁴ Bauer, *Lexicon*, 639.

¹⁵ “Peitho,” en.Wikipedia.org. Accessed October 5, 2017.

It is also found in:

ESV **Acts 5:40** So they took his advice ...

ESV **Galatians 5:7-8** You were running well. Who hindered you from obeying the truth? This persuasion is not from him who calls you.

Peitho can mean to obey, but the feel of it is an obedience born of persuasion. Found here in the middle/passive form, it technically could be translated, “allow yourselves to be persuaded by your leaders.”

W.E. Vine stated that with *peitho*, “the obedience suggested is not by submission to authority, but resulting from persuasion.”¹⁶ **Lenski’s** comment on this text is that if one allows oneself to be convinced by someone, one obeys him.¹⁷

Nuance: The author’s use of *peitho* suggests that dialog will take place, persuasive teaching will be given, and arguments will be given to bring about this obedience. When someone is persuaded of something, he will act on it and, in that sense, obey it with joyful conviction. Believers are not to mindlessly obey their leaders; there is to first be discussion, dialog, reasoning, and persuasion. The church is to be open to being persuaded by the leaders, rather than responding in robot-like obedience. The words of the leaders are to be given extra weight in the discussion.

Aristotle: “We believe good men more fully and more readily than others: this is true generally whatever the question is, and absolutely true where exact certainty is impossible and opinions are divided ... his character may almost be called the most effective means of persuasion he possesses.”¹⁸

Dwight Eisenhower: “I would rather try to persuade a man to go along, because once I have persuaded him, he will stick. If I scare him, he will stay just as long as he is scared, and then he is gone.”¹⁹

Harry Truman: “My definition of a leader ... is a man who can persuade people to do what they don’t want to do, or do what they’re too lazy to do, and like it.”²⁰

Submit

The common Greek word for “submit” is *hupotasso*:

ESV **Colossians 3:18** Wives, submit (*hupotasso*) to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord.

¹⁶ W.E. Vine, *Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* (Iowa Falls: Riverside Book and Bible, 1952), 124.

¹⁷ R.C.H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Epistle to the Hebrews and the Epistle of James* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing, 1966), 490.

¹⁸ *Aristotle’s Rhetoric*, Book 1, Chapter 2.

¹⁹ “Dwight D. Eisenhower Quotes”, BrainyQuote.com. Accessed September 24, 2020.

²⁰ “Harry Truman,” GoodReads.com. Accessed September 24, 2020.

ESV 1 Peter 2:13-14 Be subject (*hupotasso*) for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors ...

However, this is not the word used in **Hebrews 13:17** for “submit.” Instead, *hupeiko* is used, used only here in the entire New Testament. It does mean submit, but outside the New Testament it was used of contestants.²¹ It refers not to a structure (like government) to which one submits, but to a process or battle after which one yields (surrenders). Thus, it means to submit in the sense of surrendering or yielding. The picture is one of serious discussion and dialog prior to one party giving way.

17. In Hebrews 13:17, believers are encouraged to “obey” and “submit” to church leaders. How does this harmonize with Jesus’ words in Luke 22:25-26? It appears that the elders have the final say in decision making. However, it is their duty to serve the church by taking the time to persuade the congregation on major decisions. It is to be expected that part of the process is a wrestling through issues, a back-and-forth healthy dialog.

Insight: Much may be gleaned from the way that the writers of the epistles appealed directly to entire congregations. The authors went to great lengths to influence all believers, not just the leadership. The apostles did not simply bark orders. Instead, they treated other believers as equals and appealed directly to them as such. No doubt local church leaders led in much the same way. An elder’s primary authority was in his ability to influence with the truth. The respect they were given was honestly earned. It was the opposite of military authority wherein soldiers respect the rank but not necessarily the man.

Teacher’s Note: Prominent in Hebrews 13 is the critical role that church leaders play combating false teaching. Rather than listening to strange teachings, the Hebrew Christians were to listen to their own local church leaders. The author bracketed his warning against false teaching between two verses on looking to their leaders for direction (**13:7, 17**). F.F. Bruce commented, “There would always be a tendency throughout the churches for visitors who came purveying new and esoteric doctrines to be regarded as much more attractive and interesting personalities than the rather humdrum local leaders, who never taught anything new, but were content with the conservative line of apostolic tradition. Nevertheless, it was those local leaders, and not the purveyors of strange teaching, who had a real concern for the welfare of the church and a sense of their accountability to God in this respect.”²²

— Summary —

18. How would you summarize all the above texts about leadership in the Body of Christ? Church leaders are to be servant leaders, with the same authority as children and slaves. They are to serve by making the effort to build congregational consensus on major decisions. This is done through teaching what Scripture says on an issue, privately talking with church members about it, appealing to those who differ, and—after much persuasion—calling on any dissenting minority to yield to the elders along with the rest of the congregation.

²¹ Rienecker, *Linguistic Key*, 720. Also “hupeiko”, BibleStudyTools.org; accessed February 25, 2021.

²² FF Bruce, “The Epistle to the Hebrews,” *New London Commentaries* (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1964), 408.

Church government is to include the consensus of all the brothers, with elders given special consideration in the consensus process. The elders' arguments are to be given extra weight. At the end of the day, when an impasse arises, the church (or more likely, a few holdouts) is to yield to its elders (**Hebrews 13:17**).²³

What we are dealing with in the final analysis is a delicate balancing act. The church is to be open to being "persuaded" by its leaders. There is to be discussion and teaching, argument and persuasion. The picture is not that of mindless, unquestioning obedience. Yet after a battle (wrangling over ideas), the church should ultimately "submit" (yield) to its leaders. This is especially true in matters of doctrine. The elders should offer substantial evidence as to why a certain teaching should or should not be believed (such as the Trinity, the deity of Christ, the Gospel message, the reality of hell or gender roles in the home and church). Yet the elders are the final line of defense against error and if push comes to shove, the those disagreeing with the elder are called up to yield to the elders' judgment.

The benefits of this process are:

- The mind of Christ is more likely found when the whole congregation wrestles decisions.
- The Holy Spirit is given free rein to guide the church.
- Congregants are encouraged when their thoughts are respectfully considered in accordance with Scripture.
- Unity is strengthened.

**** = Ask this question before having someone read the text aloud.

Next Lesson: E-mail the next set of discussion questions out to the class (or print them up and hand them out at the end of this lesson). Ask them to consider the issues, answer the questions and be prepared to discuss them at the next meeting.

Teacher Preparation: NTRF.org has an article, video, and audio on this topic.

Stephen E. Atkerson
NTRF.org
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²³ There will always be tares among the wheat, hidden reefs in our love feasts, wolves in sheep's clothing, those who are not walking in the Spirit, spiritual babies, those with brain damage due to previous drug use, etc.

— Background Material for Depth —

The Prominence of Pastors

By examining the following texts, what can be gleaned about the prominence of church leaders in the various New Testament churches? See *Romans 1:7, 1 Corinthians 1:2, 2 Corinthians 1:1, Galatians 1:1-2, 11, 3:15, 4:12, 28, 31, 5:13, 6:1, Ephesians 1:1, Philippians 1:1, Colossians 1:1-2, 1 Thessalonians 1:1, 5:12-13*, 2 Thessalonians 1:1, Hebrews 13:7, 17, 24, James 1:1, 5:14, 1 Peter 1:1-2, 5:1-3, 2 Peter 1:1, Jude 1, Revelation 1:4.*

ESV Romans 1:7 To all those in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints

Romans: Paul's highly theological epistle to the Romans was addressed simply to the "saints" in Rome (**1:7**), with no special mention of the shepherds. In **Romans 13**, Paul brought up submission to the civil government, but never mentioned the church submitting to its elders. In **Romans 15**, Paul expressed to the whole church his intent to visit. *Can you imagine the indignation that would take place today if someone like Billy Graham had written to an entire church that he planned to visit their city, rather than writing specifically to its leaders?*

ESV 1 Corinthians 1:2 To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints ...

ESV 2 Corinthians 1:1b To the church of God that is at Corinth, with all the saints who are in the whole of Achaia

1 & 2 Corinthians: The two letters to the Corinthian congregation were addressed to the entire "church" (**1Co 1:2, 2Co 1:1**), with no mention of its leaders in the greetings or anywhere else throughout the entirety of the letters. This omission is all the more remarkable when one considers that the two letters to Corinth deals with many leadership matters: church discipline, marriage and divorce, the Lord's Supper, giving, and church meetings.

ESV Galatians 1:2b To the churches of Galatia ...

Galatians: The greeting in **Galatians 1:2** was to all the "churches" in the region of Galatia, with no mention of any leadership. The readers were addressed throughout the book simply as "brothers."

ESV Ephesians 1:1b To the saints who are in Ephesus ...

Ephesians: The "saints in Ephesus" were the designated recipients of that letter (**Ep 1:1b**). Pastors were mentioned in **Eph 4:11**, but they were not written to directly. Furthermore, if ever there was an appropriate place to instruct the church to submit to its elders, it would have been in **Ephesians 5-6**, where Paul instructed women to submit to their husbands, children to obey their parents, and slaves their masters. Yet

it is missing. *Could this be in keeping with Jesus' words that a church leader has the same authority as a child and slave?*

ESV Philippians 1:1b To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons ...

Philippians: **Philippians 1:1b** breaks the pattern of leadership neglect: the deacons and overseers made it into the greeting. However, no other mention was made of these leaders, nor was anything written directly to them in the letter.

ESV Colossians 1:2 To the saints and faithful brothers in Christ at Colossae ...

Colossians: The salutation of **Colossians 1:2a** was simply to “the saints and faithful brothers.” Nothing else was written directly to or even *about* the leaders. **Colossians 3 & 4** deals with the relationship between man and wife, parents and children, and slaves and masters. It would have been a logical place to write about the submission of a congregation to its leaders, yet nothing was written.

ESV 1 Thessalonians 1:1b To the church of the Thessalonians ...

ESV 2 Thessalonians 1:1b To the church of the Thessalonians ...

Thessalonians: This ignoring of the leadership is also seen in the salutations of the letters to the Thessalonians (**1:1**). In **1 Thessalian 5:12-13**, Paul expressed appreciation for church leaders, but he did not write directly to them:

ESV 1 Thessalonians 5:12 ... respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you ...

1 & 2 Timothy, Titus, and Philemon were written to individual Christians, so are outside the scope of our examination.

Hebrews: There is no greeting in chapter 1 of Hebrews, but in the very last chapter the readers were asked to:

ESV Hebrews 13:24 Greet all your leaders ...

What is odd about the request in Hebrews 13:24? Not only did the author not greet the leaders directly, *he assumed they would not even be reading the letter!*

ESV Hebrews 13:7 Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith.

Hebrews 13:7 reflects the fact that the management style employed by church leaders is primarily one of leadership by example.

ESV Hebrews 13:17 Obey your leaders and submit to them ...

Hebrews 13:17 seems to overturn Jesus' teachings on the subject (it will be discussed in the next section).

ESV **1 Peter 1:1** Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to those who are elect exiles of the dispersion ...

In **1 Peter 2-3**, Peter dealt with a believer's submission to the government and a wife's submission to her husband, but, like Paul, wrote nothing about the church's submission to its leaders.

In all the letters to the churches, it is not until **1 Peter 5** that elders are written to directly. Even then, in harmony with Jesus' words, Peter instructed the elders to:

ESV **1 Peter 5:2-3** shepherd the flock of God ... not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock.

James, John's epistles, Jude, & Revelation: Church leadership is also ignored in the greetings of James' letter to the twelve scattered tribes, Peter's and John's epistles, Jude, and Revelation. All of this implies that the elders were themselves also sheep. The elders were a subset of the church as a whole.²⁴

Conclusion: Much may be gleaned from the way that the writers of the epistles appealed directly to entire congregations. The authors went to great lengths to influence all believers, not just the leadership. The apostles did not simply bark orders. Instead, they treated other believers as equals and appealed directly to them as such. No doubt local church leaders led in much the same way. An elder's primary authority was in his ability to influence with the truth. The respect they were given was honestly earned. It was the opposite of military authority wherein soldiers respect the rank but not necessarily the man.

How is the secular usage of *ekklésia* seen in its use in Acts 19:23-41 (translated "assembly" (19:32, 41) and "legal assembly" in 19:39)?

ESV **Acts 19:24-25** ... a man named Demetrius, a silversmith, who made silver shrines of Artemis, brought no little business to the craftsmen. These he gathered together, with the workmen in similar trades, and said, "Men, you know that from this business we have our wealth."

ESV **Acts 19:26-27** ... Paul has persuaded and turned away a great many people, saying that gods made with hands are not gods. And there is danger not only that this trade of ours may come into disrepute ...

²⁴ There was no clergy/laity distinction.

Here we have a gathering of a trade union, called together by Demetrius, to deal with the problem of lost business due to the preaching of the Gospel.

ESV Acts 19:28 When they heard this they were enraged and were crying out, "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!"

ESV Acts 19:29 ... and they rushed together into the theater ...

The craftsmen agreed there was a problem. They were worked up over it. *Why did they go into the theater?* This is where political decisions were made by the civil government. This was the public place to convene.²⁵

ESV Acts 19:32 Now some cried out one thing, some another, for the assembly (*ekklésia*) was in confusion, and most of them did not know why they had come together.

Luke described this confused meeting as an *ekklésia*. They, as a trade union of sorts, intended to decide what to do about the Gospel.

ESV Acts 19:35-41 ... when the town clerk had quieted the crowd, he said, "Men of Ephesus ... you ought to be quiet and do nothing rash. For you have brought these men here who are neither sacrilegious nor blasphemers of our goddess. If therefore Demetrius and the craftsmen with him have a complaint against anyone, the courts are open, and there are proconsuls. Let them bring charges against one another. But if you seek anything further, it shall be settled in the regular assembly (*ekklésia*).... when he had said these things, he dismissed the assembly (*ekklésia*).

Here we see the local civil authority appeal to them, stating that they have overstepped their jurisdiction. This, he said, was a matter not for the trade union *ekklésia*, but for the "regular" (ESV) or "legal" (NIV) or "lawful" (NAS) *ekklésia*.

Summary: These occurrences of *ekklésia* (rendered "assembly," "regular assembly," and "assembly") refer to a decision-making meeting of "craftsmen" (**Acts 19:24**). They were "called" (**Acts 19:25**) together by Demetrius into the town theater (**Acts 19:31**). The idea was to decide what to do about Paul (**Acts 19:25-27, 38**), though there was so much confusion the majority did not know why they had been summoned (**19:32**). This is an example of *ekklésia* where it is used to refer to a regularly summoned political body (in this case, silver craftsmen and those in related trades, **Acts 19:25**). They convened (as a sort of trade union) to decide what to do about a damaged reputation and lost business (**Acts 19:27**). As it turns out, they overstepped their jurisdiction in wanting to deal with Paul, so the city clerk suggested that the matter be settled by the "legal" (civil) *ekklésia*, **Acts 19:37-39** (rather than by the trade union *ekklésia*).

²⁵ Bauer, *Lexicon*, 353.

From **1 Corinthians 6:1ff** we learn that ordinary believers are declared competent to judge disputes:

ESV 1 Corinthians 6:1-3 When one of you has a grievance against another, does he dare go to law before the unrighteous instead of the saints? Or do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if the world is to be judged by you, are you incompetent to try trivial cases? Do you not know that we are to judge angels? How much more, then, matters pertaining to this life!

Truth: Ordinary believers are declared competent to judge disputes.

NIV Job 34:4 (Elihu's advice to Job): Let us discern for ourselves what is right; let us learn together what is good.

What are some other examples in the New Testament where the whole congregation is involved in making decisions? *Acts 1:15-16a, 21, 23, 6:2-3a, 5a, 6a, 14:23 (see margin translation), 15:1-4, 5-35.* The above texts illustrate that the responsibility for making decisions resides in the church as a whole as led by its elders, rather than solely with its elders.

In **Acts 1:15-26**, Peter charged the Jerusalem church as a whole with finding a replacement for Judas.

ESV Acts 1:15 In those days **Peter** stood up among the brothers (the company of persons was in all about 120) and said ...

The Point: In Acts 1:15ff, Peter identified the problem (Judas needs to be replaced) but it was to the Jerusalem church itself that Peter looked to find a replacement. Peter didn't act unilaterally. Thus, we see:

ESV Acts 1:23 ... **they** (the church) put forward two, Joseph called Barsabbas, who was also called Justus, and Matthias.

Later, the apostles looked to the church corporately to pick men to administer the church's food program:

In **Acts 6:1-4**, the apostles identified a problem (Greek widows neglected) and suggested a solution (pick deacons).

ESV Acts 6:3 Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty.

The church approved of their solution and it was the church that selected men to administer the church's welfare system (**6:3, 5**).

ESV **Acts 6:5** ... what they said pleased the whole gathering, and they chose ...

The Jerusalem Council: If ever there were a proper time and place for the Apostles to make a decision alone, apart from the church, it was at the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15). The original Apostles were the standard for doctrine and practice. They had been hand-chosen, and personally trained, by Jesus Himself. They were eye-witnesses of the resurrection. In Acts 15, the very nature of the Gospel had been called into question. Yet even here, the amazing fact is that the Apostles not only included the local Jerusalem elders, but also the whole church!

The purveyors of the false Gospel had come to Antioch from Jerusalem. They caused quite a controversy. Now, in **Acts 15:1-2**, the church of Antioch decided to send the matter back to Jerusalem for arbitration:

ESV **Acts 15:2** Paul and Barnabas ... were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and the elders about this question.

ESV **Acts 15:4** When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the **church** and the apostles and the elders ...

ESV **Acts 15:6** The apostles and the elders were gathered together to consider this matter. << It sounds as if only the apostles and elders were gathered together.

ESV **Acts 15:7** ... much debate ...

ESV **Acts 15:12** ... all the assembly fell silent, and they listened to Barnabas and Paul ...

ESV **Acts 15:22-23** Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, **with the whole church**, to choose men from among them and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They sent Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leading men among the brothers, with the following letter: "The brothers, both the apostles and the elders, to the brothers who are of the Gentiles in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia, greetings...."

Note: The whole church in Jerusalem was in on the resolution of the conflict, agreeing with the deliberations of the leaders (**15:4, 6, 12, 22, 23** in KJV).

ESV **Acts 15:23** The brothers, both the apostles and the elders, to the brothers who are of the Gentiles in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia, greetings ...

KJV **Acts 15:23** And they wrote *letters* by them after this manner; The apostles and elders and brethren *send* greeting unto the brethren which are of the Gentiles in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia:

The Greek here can go either way. Note how strongly the KJV shows congregational involvement.

Colin Brown: "... in the council's decision-making they are accorded no special preeminence.... It is consistent with the non-authoritarian, collegiate character of church leadership which Acts consistently depicts (1:13-26; 6:2ff; 8:14ff; 11:1ff; 13:1-4)." ²⁶

Acts 14:23 (NIV marginal translation) indicates that the church elected its own elders (though in other passages the apostles appointed them). ²⁷

How should both local congregational consensus and universal church consensus apply to interpreting the Bible? The Scriptures teach that the Holy Spirit dwells in every believer. As we survey the beliefs of the church around the world today, and also back throughout the past two millennia of church history, various fundamental agreements can be readily observed concerning the correct interpretation of Scripture. This has to be more than coincidence. It is the work of the Spirit. Some of these general agreements are about such matters as the Virgin Birth, the Trinity (One God in Three Persons), the deity of Christ, the propitiatory nature of Christ's death on the cross, the bodily resurrection of Christ and the future bodily return of Christ, the future bodily resurrection of the dead, and the inspiration and canon of Scripture. When the entire church universal has arrived at consensus regarding a doctrine, it becomes authoritative. *Does one lone congregation have the right to defy the consensus of the whole church in the world and throughout history?* We think not. These basic agreed upon doctrines constitute a *regula fide*, the rule of faith. We need a good dose of historical humility!

Certainly, we should study the Bible as individuals, but we should not study the Bible individualistically. We need to weigh our interpretations against the consensus of the whole church, not just our local church, but the church universal. Historical humility is called for. To reject the time-tested conclusions of millions of our fellow believers over thousands of years is to effectively make one's self into a little Pope.

G. K. Chesterton: "Tradition means giving votes to the most obscure of all classes, our ancestors. It is the democracy of the dead. Tradition refuses to submit to the small and arrogant oligarchy of those who merely happen to be walking about." ²⁸

What special instructions did Peter have for young men in the consensus process (1Pe 5:5a)?

NAS 1 Peter 5:5a You younger men, likewise, be subject to your elders ...

²⁶ Brown, "Apostle," *Dictionary*, vol. 1, 135.

²⁷ "Paul and Barnabas had elders elected" (footnoted alternative translation, NIV).

²⁸ "GK Chesterton," GoodReads.com. Accessed September 20, 2020.

Church government is generally to be by elder-led consensus of the whole church. In particular, however, younger men are specifically instructed to submit (*hupotasso*) to the elders.

Young men: Don't be a blockhead! Sometimes young men can be rather head strong, unreasonable, unyielding, a little too full of vim and vigor.

How would you answer the following objection? "It is a fact of apostolic history that the churches to whom Paul wrote were newly planted. They were in the incipient stage of development. It was one of the apostle's axioms that an elder should not be a recent convert and that a man must be tested for some time before assuming that office and function. Far too much is made of that early situation. Government was by consensus then, but out of necessity, not out of principle. Paul's instruction to Titus to amend what was defective in the churches and appoint elders in every place rather debunks the argument for government by consensus. It was a passing stage of ecclesiastical development. Babies wear diapers for a time and that is normal. But hopefully they outgrow that stage. Maturity in the *ekklésia* must also come and that means the appointment of elders, which is a shift away from rule by consensus. We must not build a paradigm of church life from what was a peculiar and passing stage in the progress of the fledgling church."

Answers:

1. The Lord Jesus' words of Matthew 18 cannot be avoided. We are to tell it to the "church," not the elders.
2. The fundamental meaning of *ekklésia* refers to a decision-making body.
3. Further, the Jerusalem church had both elders and apostles, yet the whole church was in on the decision-making process (Ac 15).
4. The groundwork laid by the apostles was foundational. To replace that with something else is dangerous ground, especially when that something else is based on a supposed expectation of development beyond the New Testament texts. Jesus choose *ekklésia* as His preferred word for the church. Each church is its own legislature! And this is the great protection against hierarchical structures, which by definition turn churches from being families into organizations.

In the consensus process, exactly who is it that makes the decisions? Men and women both? Or only the men? 1 Corinthians 11:1ff, 14:33-35, 1 Timothy 2:11-15. Everyone's thoughts are important. Within the Trinity, though God the Father and God the Son are equal Persons, the Son voluntarily submits to the Father's will. Human family order mirrors this. Even though men and women are absolutely equal in God's sight, wives are called upon to submit to their husbands. God is the head of Christ, Christ is the head of the church, and the husband is the head of his family. One way this order is expressed within the church is that only men are to serve as elders and Bible teachers. This order is further expressed in that the men, as the heads of their homes, are ultimately to represent their wives' opinions in the consensus process. Certainly, the wives have valid opinions and insights. These concerns may be expressed directly by the women to various men in private conversations and or to and through their husbands. Yet in the final analysis, it is the brothers who must make

decisions that are binding on the church. The husbands are to duly consider their wife's views, but it is the brothers who have the last say.

In matters of mere preference, being considerate of the women and yielding to their desires is the proper course to take. However, in matters of theology or the application of theological or sin issues, the men must make the final decisions. R.C.H. Lenski quoted from an *Opinion of the Theological Faculty of Capital University*, Columbus, Ohio: "How the granting of voice and vote to women in all congregational meetings can do anything but place women completely on a level with men in all such meetings and gravely interfere with their divinely ordered subjection and obedience, we are unable to see."²⁹

What if there are some folks involved with the church who are uncommitted or who are new converts? Do their voices "count" in the consensus process? This is precisely where **Hebrews 13:17** comes into play. They are to listen to and yield to the wisdom of the elders.

What if people begin coming to the church after consensus is reached on an issue? Must the process begin all over again? No, they would be coming with the understanding that the church is already moving in a certain direction. They would be free to try to persuade the church differently, but otherwise must "submit" to the previous decision of the church. This is another example of where **Hebrews 13:17** would be important to remember.

What if consensus is reached by all but one man? Should he be allowed to throw a monkey-wrench into the whole process? Remember that the goal is consensus and not necessarily unanimity. Certainly, stubborn, in-the-flesh, socially maladjusted, rebellious, or contentious people should not be allowed to derail the church. Ultimately, this would be another occasion for **Hebrews 13:17** to be applied. After all the discussion is over, and time has passed for the various arguments to be considered, the elders have the last word.

Practical Observation: The process of achieving of consensus will mostly occur *apart* from **1 Corinthians 14** participatory church meetings. Certainly, focused teaching times or perhaps special meetings may be called to explore an issue, but for the most part consensus will be built one on one during private discussions or in such times as the fellowship of the Lord's Supper. Communication and relationships should be such that at any given point in the process of building consensus, every church member should know what every other member is thinking. The matter may not even be brought up in a church meeting until it is time to announce that consensus has finally been reached.

²⁹ RCH Lenski, *Interpretation of I and II Corinthians* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1963), 617.